

M.S. Messer.

THE
Patchwork Quilt
and
Some Other Quilts

By
GEORGE FRANCIS DOW

Printed in advance of publication in
Old-Time New England
The quarterly magazine of
THE SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF
NEW ENGLAND ANTIQUITIES

WOMAN'S EDUCATIONAL & INDUSTRIAL UNION
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

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A Quilting Bee in the Olden Time

FROM A DRAWING BY H. W. PIERCE

The Patchwork Quilt and Some Other Quilts

TO the New Englander, the subject of bedcoverings must always be of paramount importance and this was never more true than in the olden days when furnace heat was a thing unknown and the advantages of steam or hot water, as applied to heating, could not be debated by householders. Previous to a century ago our forefathers were entirely dependent upon the open fireplace, and during the winter season everyone must wear thick clothing and provide an ample supply of warm coverings for the beds. Those were the days of warming pans, of heated bricks and flatirons taken to bed by both the children and the grown-ups, and of feather beds, comforters and patch-work quilts.

Bedcoverings in the olden time, and even in our day, have a variety of names with distinctions sometimes difficult to classify. Sometimes they are *coverlets* and then again *counterpanes*. A *comforter* suggests warmth and comfort not only for the bed but for the neck. The *bedcover* is universal as is the *quilt*; and now-a-days we hear of the *bedspread* and the *puff*. The patchwork quilt formerly was one of the most familiar and necessary articles of household furnishing and its origin reaches backward into the dim and unknown past. It was brought to Massachusetts by the first settlers. In cottage and castle it was well known in the days of King John, and down through the generations its making has supplied oc-

cupation and amusement to countless women whose life interests centered in their homes and household furnishings. "The selection of design, the care in piecing, the patience in quilting, all make for feminine contentment and domestic happiness." Its manufacture may well be styled one of the household arts, for artistic indeed are the bold conceptions of many of the designs; while the piecing and the patching provide ample opportunity for needlework of the finest character.

But first let us define, so far as may be possible, these variously named bedcoverings. To begin with the *quilt*, — the dictionaries inform us that the early English word was spelled *quilte*. The 14th century French spelled it *cuitte*. In the Latin it is spelled *culcitra*, meaning a stuffed mattress or cushion, which at once suggests those thick comforts filled with wool or feathers under which the German always sleeps. A quilt is a cover or coverlet made by stitching together two thicknesses of a fabric with some soft substance between them. This applies to bedcovers and also to quilted petticoats so commonly worn a century or more ago. It also describes the thickly padded armor worn by the English archers in the days of Robin Hood. Ben Jonson, the English dramatist, in his "Epiocoene, or the Silent Woman," written in 1609, uses the sentence:

"And you have fastened on a thick quilt, or flock bed, on the outside of the door."

Merlin, the sixth century English bard, wrote:

"After that thei lay down to slepe
vpon the grasse, for other *quyltes* ne
pilowes hadde thei noon."

What is a coverlet? Originally, any covering for a bed; now, specifically, the outer covering. The word comes from the French *couver-lit* — a bed-covering. The handwoven coverlets of many beautiful designs, in blue and white and red and brown, are well known and formerly were woven everywhere. New England weavers supplied varied designs long before the Revolution, and New York, Pennsylvania and the Middle West have provided an almost endless variety of patterns. Profusely illustrated volumes have been written describing them and a reviving demand makes them an article of hand loom manufacture at the present time.

The *counterpane*, formerly a bed-cover, now describes a light coverlet woven of cotton with raised figures. One variety is known as the Marseilles quilt. The word is a corruption of *counterpoint*, in allusion to the panes or squares of which bedcovers are often composed. The counterpane was never quilted and seventy-five years ago was frequently made of "patch," a cotton fabric with glazed printed design, and usually matched the bed-hangings. At an earlier day it was made of "copper plate," a cotton fabric having designs printed from engraved copper plates, hence the popular name. Both of these fabrics were imported from England and France, and patriotic devices and classical and English landscapes were favorite designs.

The *bedspread* and the *bedcover* may be considered as one and the same — the uppermost covering of a bed and

accordingly of an ornamental character in general. The *comforter* was a thickly quilted bedcover made of several thicknesses of sheet cotton or wool prepared for the purpose. This was too thick to be quilted so it was knotted at regular intervals to prevent the interlining from slipping out of place. Frequently it is called a "comfort" and certainly it is very warm and comfortable on a cold winter's night. In northern Europe the "comforts" are filled with down and feathers and latterly they have been introduced into America where now they are popularly known as "puffs" and "down puffs." These are quilted or stitched in bold circles and artistic designs by a machine made especially for the work.

There is one other name that was applied to a bedcovering in the Colonial times but which is never heard today in that connection. In the days immediately following the settlement many a New England bed was covered with a *rug*. When William Clarke of Salem died in 1647, in the parlor of his house was a bed with a green rug covering it which was valued by the appraisers at fourteen shillings. The term was commonly in use at the time, in fact, as commonly as the word coverlet. In the probate of Essex County, Massachusetts, estates between the years 1635 and 1674, coverlets are mentioned one hundred and forty-two times and rugs one hundred and fifty-seven times while quilts are listed only four times. These early bed rugs were usually thick woolen coverings with a shaggy nap.

John Fletcher, the dramatist and poet, in his play, "The Night-Walker or the Little Thief," first given in 1634, puts into the mouth of one of his characters the following:



Counterpane of Quilted Galloon

MADE IN BEVERLY, MASS., IN 1770, BY ANNE CLEAVES



Printed India Cotton

BROUGHT INTO THE PORT OF SALEM IN 1797



Counterpane made of "copper plate," 1790-1800

FORMERLY OWNED BY MRS. MARY HOLTON OF DANVERS, WIFE OF JUDGE HOLTON,
PRESIDENT OF THE CONTINENTAL CONGRESS

"I wish'd 'em then to get him to bed; and they did so, and almost smother'd him with ruggs and pillows."

Rev. Nathaniel Ward of Ipswich, Mass., in his "Simple Cobler of Aggawam," published in 1647, has the following:

"To cloathe Summer matter with Winter Rugge, would make the Reader sweat."

A never-failing source of accurate information as to the furnishings and equipment of the New England household in the olden time is the probate records—specifically, the inventory of the property taken in connection with the settlement of the estate. For many years it was the well-nigh universal custom to list, room by room, the contents of a house and from these painstaking inventories it now becomes possible to reconstruct in mental picture the interiors of those homes where lived and died our Puritan ancestors. In connection with the present subject we learn from these inventories that it was quite the usual habit to set up a bed in the parlor and we also learn of the existence of different kinds of rugs used in the bed furnishings—cotton rugs, English rugs, Irish rugs, cradle rugs, etc. There were worsted coverlets, tapestry coverlets and embroidered coverlets. A darnacle coverlet is listed in 1665, but as darnacle curtains appear in the same inventory it is safe to assume that darnacle is the name of some long-forgotten fabric as the word does not appear in the Century Dictionary. But what is a "branched coverlet?" Mrs. Thomas Newhall of Lynn possessed in 1674 a green rug and a branched coverlet.

Let us have a look at a few of these

wills and inventories. In 1640, the widow Bethia Cartwright of Salem, bequeathed to her sister, then living in England, her bed, bolster, blanket and coverlet. It is an open question if the value of the property equalled the probable cost of transporting it to that loving sister in distant England.

Mrs. Joanna Cummings of Salem, at her death in 1644, among many other items possessed a feather bed, flock bolster and a green rug, jointly valued at £2.5.0.

In the "hall" of John Goffe's house in Newbury, in 1641, were found "3 bedsteeds, £1.; 1 pr. curtains with 3 rods, 18s.; 1 green rugg, £1.6.; 2 blankets, 15s.; 1 bed, bolster and 4 pillows, £4.10.; 1 coverlet, 10s.; and 1 bed matt, 2s."

The next year William Howard, afterwards the first town clerk of Topsfield, was one of the appraisers of the estate of Samuel Smith of Enon, the name by which Wenham was then known. In one of the chambers he found a "bed, blancits & coverlet" which he valued at £7.8. Rather a valuable bed, or, may it have been the coverlet? In connection with "cobbard clothes" at £1. he lists a "carpitt" at 15s., and this carpet, curiously enough, he did not find on the floor but on a table. Rugs on beds and carpets on tables were the correct thing in the 1600's. Joanna Cummings owned a "carpet & table" that were valued at 7s. 8d. Joseph Metcalf of Ipswich had "a table & old carpett" worth £1. In the parlor of Governor Endecott's house in Boston were found a "Table, Carpet & 3 stools," valued at 50s. William Bacon's "carpets & quishens" were worth £1.10s. and in the inventory of the estate of Rev. Ezekiel Rogers of Rowley appears the follow-



Counterpane worked with French Knots

MADE ABOUT 1800, BY MRS. ANNE (CLEAVES) HERRICK OF BEVERLY, MASS.



Counterpane made in Topsfield, 1790-1800

PATTERN WORKED IN INDIGO BLUE ON A HOMESPUN LINEN SHEET



Counterpane made from a Blanket Sheet

EMBROIDERED IN BLUE, GREENISH BLUE, RED AND YELLOW

ing: "a presse and a litle Table with ther Carpets, £1.10s."

John Whittingham lived in Ipswich and was one of the six men to whom was granted by the General Court the land at the New Meadows, now Topsfield. He died in 1648. In the parlor of his house was found a "Joyne Table with five chairs & one ould Carpet, 10s.; one cupboard and Cloth, 10s.; 2 paire Cobirons, 15s.; two window Curtains and curtaine rods, 6s.; one case of Bottles, 5s.; Books, £6.5s.; Eleven Cushions, £1.10s.; one Still, 5s.;" and perhaps most important of all—"one fetherbed, one flockbed, two boulsters, one pillow, one p. blankets, one Rugge, Curtains & valiants and bedsted, £12." In the chamber over the parlor was another bedstead well supplied with furnishings, including two quilts, a blue coverlet and a trundle bed. This upstairs chamber had wall hangings which were valued at £2.10s. and in the room were six trunks, a chest and a box, containing stores of bed linen, table cloths, napkins, hose yarn, silver plate and eleven spoons. Two chairs, four stools, a screen, two pairs of cobirons and a pair of tongs completed the furnishings of the room. It almost stands open before us. And those wall hangings valued at £2.10s.! If safely preserved what would they not be worth today?

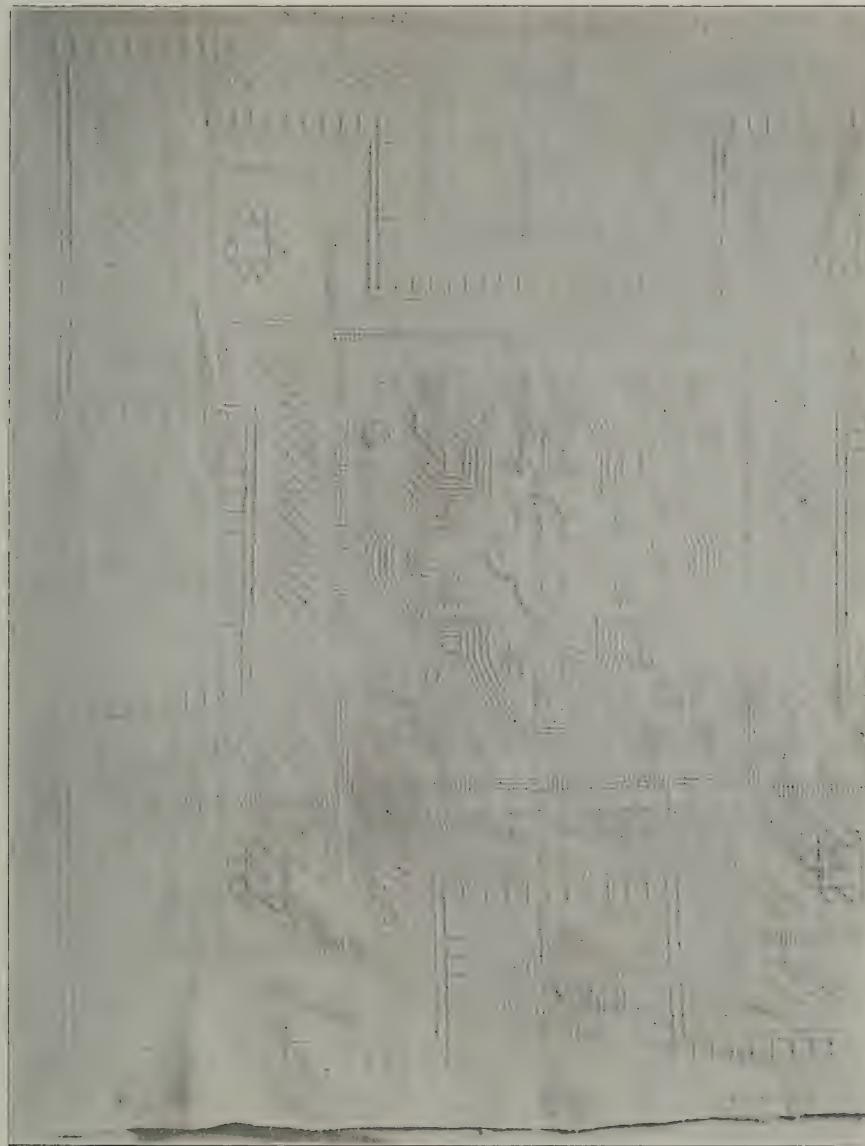
Another parlor chamber in a house in Newbury, in which had lived the minister, the Rev. James Noyes, was more meagrely furnished. Here the appraisers found "2 boxes, 4 hogsheds, a musket and a gun and two swords, £2.; a bolster and a quilt & two blanckets and a parsell of Cotton wooll, £3.10s."

Just one more inventory — the estate of William Clarke who died in 1647 in Salem. The parlor contained a half-

headed bedstead with curtains and valance which was furnished with a feather bed and bolster, a straw bed and flock bolster, white blankets, sheets, and a green rug. In a corner of this parlor stood another bedstead having a mat, canvas flock bed, sheets, old blankets and a red rug, and in the chamber over the kitchen was a low bedstead with a flock bed and bolster, a blanket, a rug and an old quilt.

Here are two kinds of bedsteads mentioned in this house, but there were other kinds in frequent use at the time: — high beds and side beds, canopy bedsteads, half-headed, joined, cabin, corded, close, press, standing, truckle and trundle bedsteads and what is strange indeed, not a single example of these early bedsteads has been preserved. All have been worn out or destroyed — supplanted by a newer fashion — and we today can only imagine their various forms and decorations.

In the New England vernacular, materials for quilts were "skurse" in the olden times. The settlers, of course, brought all their furnishings from England and a few years elapsed before wool and flax were produced here in any quantity. Meanwhile all fabrics were imported and paid for by shipments of salt fish, furs, lumber, corn, etc. A brisk trade soon sprang up with the West Indies and Spain and cotton was brought into the New England ports. Some of the fabrics in common use before 1650 have names that sound strangely in our ears. Darnacle has been mentioned. There also were darnex and dowlas, challis and cheny, grosgrane, inkle and inkle mancster, lockrum, ossembrike, paragon, pene-stone, perpetuana, say, sempiternum, shag, stammell and water paragon.



Counterpane made in 1839 in Exeter N. H.

THE PATTERN IS WOVEN WITH LAMP WICKING

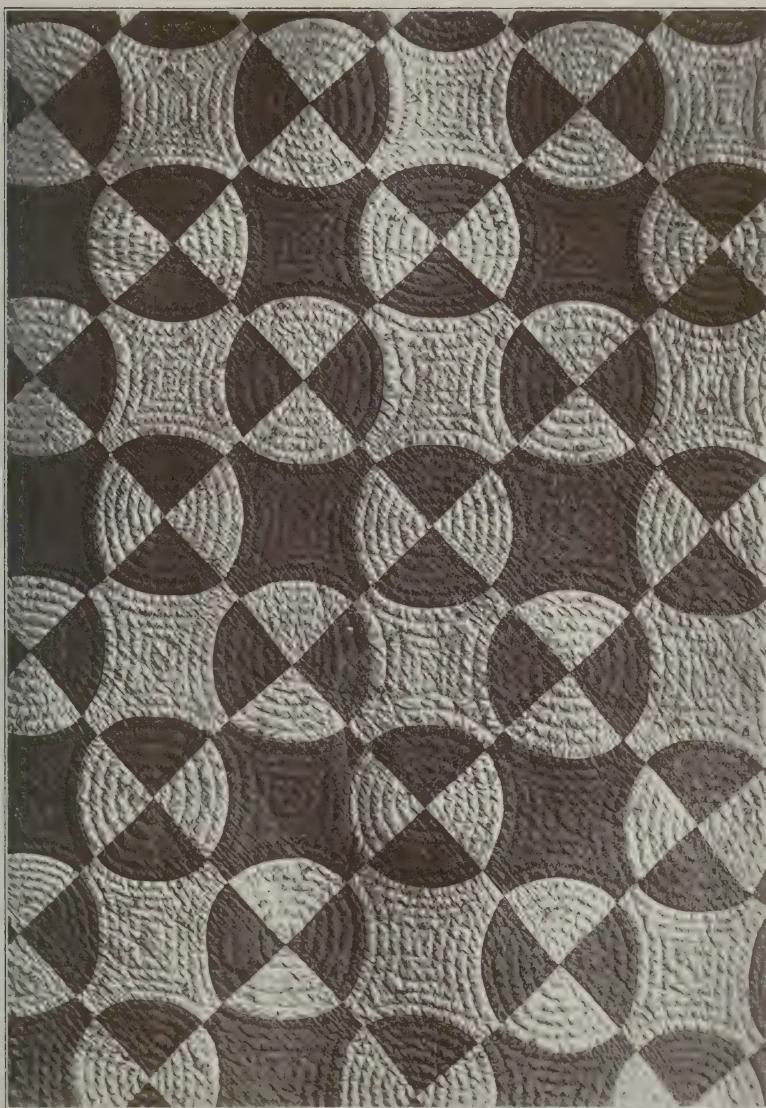
There were baize for jackets, calico for dresses, linsey woolsey for heavy skirts, serge for various articles of clothing, coifing stuff for caps, linen for forehead bands and many other uses, dimity for bed hangings and petticoats, and a fabric known as "barber's stuff." In time some of these materials became available for quilt making and at a still later time the handwoven, home-dyed fabrics were used and some of these were rudely decorated with tied and dipped patterns of stamped and stencilled designs.

It should always be kept in mind, however, that geographical location largely enters into the production and character of the quilt, and the family that was "well-off" of course would be supplied more abundantly with furnishings and be less dependent upon homely makeshifts and the daily practice of household economy. Those living in the seaport towns, where most of the shops were found, would be likely to follow the simplest course of fashion and buy from the stock just imported from England or Holland. The hand loom was found everywhere but more generally in the country. Weaving was a trade for men and so practiced, but many a farmhouse had its loom and every country home its spinning wheel. In the larger towns the dame of social position or comfortable means would devote her spare moments to needlework and embroidery, while in the country the housewives would make pieced quilts or patch the clothing of their numerous children.

It naturally follows, that the handwoven coverlet should be a product of the country rather than the town and usually of the country-side farthest removed from the influences of the shop and of English goods. Even today

it is still woven in the remote settlements of Eastern Kentucky and Tennessee, and judging from existing examples the vogue of the handwoven coverlet was greater in New York, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and the Middle West than in New England although many fine examples were produced here. The manufacture of the patchwork quilt as a domestic art also seems to have reached its highest development in the Middle West during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Here it may be well to describe more exactly the patchwork quilt. The "patchwork quilt" of New England is known as the "pieced quilt" when made in the Middle West and more correctly so, for *to piece* means to join together separate pieces of like material into sections or blocks that in turn are united to form the top of the quilt. The pieces usually are of uniform shape and size and contrasting colors are blended to form the design — usually a geometric pattern. These pieces are sewed "over and over" on the wrong side. To *patch* means to mend or adorn by adding a patch or by laying over a separate piece of cloth. The French word *appliqué* well describes the patched or laid-on work where the design is cut out and applied or sewed on, in fact, "sewed-on quilts" and "laid quilts" are old terms. This type of quilt is found in New England but infrequently as compared with the "pieced quilt," here commonly known as the "patchwork quilt." Many beautiful and intricate designs are found in the *appliqué*-work quilts made everywhere in the wide Ohio River valley and in the Middle West; designs that have distinctive names and that have been used again and again by succeeding generations of quilt makers. Usually they have



Patchwork Quilt made about 1850

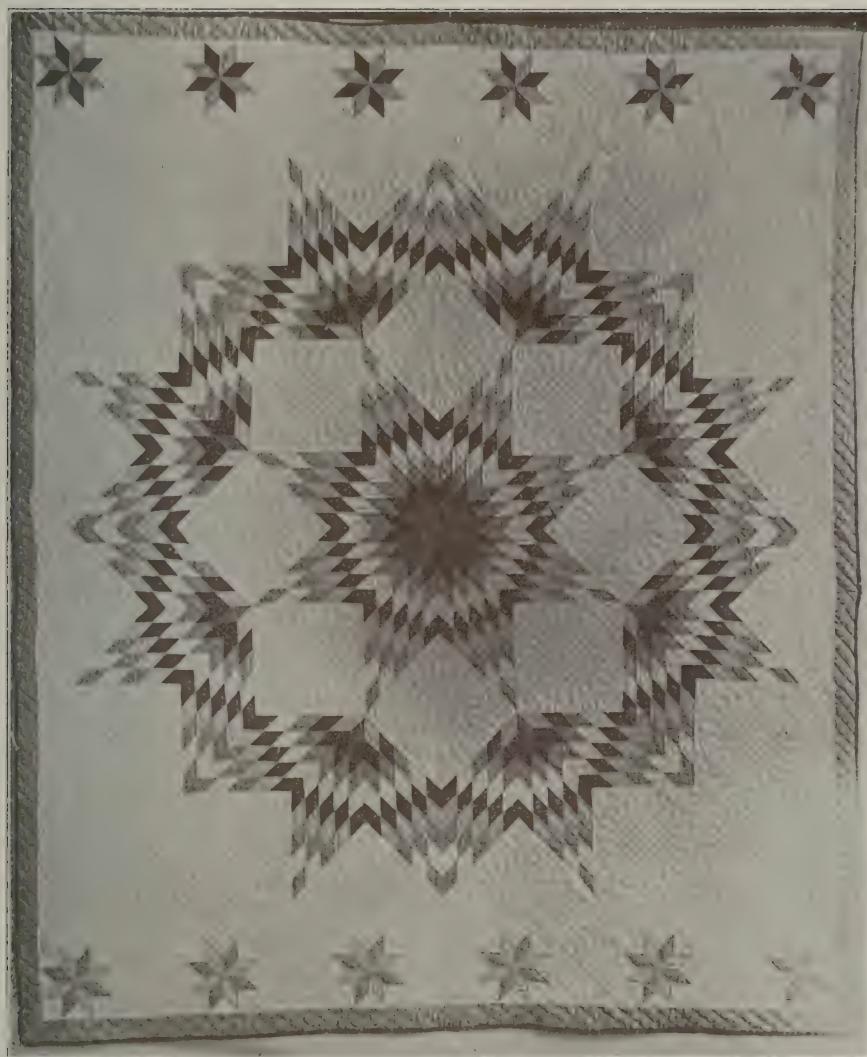
been evolved from some common flower and the name naturally follows: the Harrison Rose, the Rose of Sharon, the Double Tulip, Princess Feathers, etc. Homemade dyes were made from common plants and barks and from childhood to the grave the industry flourished.

In early times the pieces were nearly always of a woolen fabric, the brighter colored cloth being saved for the more central portions of the design. Every scrap and remnant of material left from the making of garments was saved and the best pieces of worn-out garments were carefully cut out and made into quilt pieces. The historian of the Saco Valley, Maine, relates that a scarlet broadcloth cloak formerly worn by a Lord Mayor of London and brought to New England by a member of the Merritt family of Salisbury, Mass., after many adventures ended its days as small bits of vivid color in a patchwork quilt made in Maine. Portions of discarded military uniforms, of flannel shirts and well-worn petticoats were utilized and frequently an old blanket would be used for a lining, in fact, within a short time I found in Topsfield a much worn quilt made of large squares of brilliantly contrasting red and white, the lining of which was an old-time blanket-sheet.

The author of "Aunt Jane of Kentucky" quaintly describes the differences between the "pieced" and the "patchwork" quilt and preaches a little sermon at the same time. Aunt Jane said: "How much piecin' a quilt is like livin' a life! Many a time I've set and listened to Parson Page preachin' about predestination and free will, and I've said to myself, 'If I could jest git up in the pulpit with one of my quilts I could make it a heap plainer to folks

than Parson's making it with his big words.' You see, you start out with jest so much caliker; you don't go to the store and pick it out and buy it, but the neighbors will give you a piece here and a piece there, and you'll have a piece left over every time you cut a dress, and you take jest what happens to come. And that's like predestination: But when it comes to the cuttin' out, why, you're free to choose your own pattern. You can give the same kind of pieces to two persons, and one'll make a 'nine patch' and one'll make a 'wild-goose chase' and there'll be two quilts made out of the same kind of pieces and jest as different as can be. And that's jest the way with livin'. The Lord sends us the pieces, but we can cut them out and put 'em together pretty much to suit ourselves, and there's a heap more in the cuttin' out and sewin' than there is in the caliker."

After all the different sections of the quilt top are either pieced or decorated with the applied designs, they are joined together with narrow seams. The back or lining is then made, usually of white cotton, and the quilt is ready for the frame, sometimes called the poles. In form it consists of four narrow pieces of wood, two of them about ten feet long and the other two perhaps half as long. These are pierced with frequent holes and are pinned together into an oblong framework by small wooden pins. Each side bar is wound with cotton strips or has a piece of light canvas fastened along its entire length, to which are sewed the edges of the lining of the quilt, one side to each bar. Then the extra width is rolled up on one side of the frame, and after tightly stretching the lining, the pegs are inserted in the frame, which is now supported on the backs of chairs,



Patchwork Quilt "Sunburst" Pattern made in 1910

the seats of which were sometimes weighted with sad irons or stones to keep them from tipping over. On this stretched lining or back of the quilt the interlining of cotton or wool is now evenly spread and over it the top of patchwork is placed and carefully stretched in turn and the whole caught together here and there to prevent any slipping of the interlining.

Upon the smooth top the pattern is drawn for the quilting or sewing together of the top and lining of the quilt. Some of these quilting designs are very elaborate and are outlined from the pattern in faint pencil lines or with chalk on the dark colored fabrics. Straight lines are made by snapping a tightly stretched line with a well-chalked surface. Curved lines and circles are easily produced by tracing the outlines of various sized plates and saucers. Then the quilting begins. The fine thread is now run through the several thicknesses of the quilt in a small stitch as evenly as possible. Down and through and up again with one hand above and one below and the body in a position rather uncomfortable. But patience and skill in time produce marvelous and beautiful results as the entire surface of the quilt is covered with the elaborate design oftentimes seen to best advantage on the back of the quilt which is as beautiful as the top.

Taken up at odd moments quilting was the fine needlework of the house. Neighbors invited to tea would help to prick in, stitch by stitch, the lines of the flowers or scrolls and the quilting party frequently assembled in the natural desire for human intercourse and social gathering.

In country towns much of the population was thinly distributed and it

was impossible for the housewife to run in next door for a few moments' idle chat. Frequently the nearest house was a half-mile or more distant and the feminine desire for social diversion was sadly curbed by the constant demands of farm labor for horses that otherwise might have been used in the chaise or light wagon. The weekly gathering at the meeting house was always looked forward to with some anticipation by both old and young and the sacredness of the day did not prevent discreet conversation on purely secular topics. But the day when farmer Perkins raised the frame of his barn was made a social event in the full meaning of the word and when the "raising" of the meeting house took place in 1759 it certainly was a gala day, for in town meeting it was voted to buy a barrel of rum and twelve barrels of cider, with sugar, beef, pork, and brown and white bread in proportion with which to refresh the gathering. Eighty-seven pounds of cheese were eaten and the town paid one shilling and six pence for the mugs that were broken—let us hope purely by accident. But "raisings" occurred at infrequent intervals. Each fall, however, there were corn huskings in various parts of the town and afterwards always plenty to eat for the jolly workers. The women were invited to apple bees and sometimes there were spinning parties. Every winter brought its singing school in the district school house and spelling matches sometimes brought together the fathers and mothers of the district as well as their sons and daughters. But the quilting party was always welcomed by the women with the keenest relish. It was their personal affair. They were free for a time from the noisy interruptions of the children

and the men were not in the way although sometimes invited to a supper. As the quilted pattern advanced over the surface "the women gossiped of neighborhood affairs, the minister, the storekeeper's latest purchases, of their dairies, and webs and linens and wools, keeping time with busy fingers to the tales they told." Meanwhile in the next room the best china and linen had been brought out and pound cake and pies and cheese and doughnuts and cold meats were set forth which, in time,

disappeared with the assistance of many cups of Hyson tea.

And when the quilt was finished it was cut from the frame with much pleasurable excitement. The plumpness of the stitched leaves and the fineness of its texture would be remarked upon and the brightly outlined design of the piecing would be admired. "It was truly a beautiful thing, for it was a growth of the farm — an expression of the life of its occupants, a fit covering for those who made it."

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